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## PERFORMER/SPECTATOR RELATIONSHIPS: A DYNAMIC OF EQUILIBRIUM

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN performer and spectator is predicated on physical, temporal, and psychological boundaries—a dynamic of mutual tension, dependency, and consent rooted in the continual flow of power from one to the other. It is this interaction between the spectator's positioning and the performer's taking action from which an artwork is born.

*On the second of August, I open the doors of the John Snow House to the public for the first NEO- CRAFT session in Calgary. A patient crowd waits in the living room of the two-story home as I pace upstairs, reciting my lines and scouring YouTube videos for motivation. At a quarter past seven, I press play on the performance soundtrack, adjust the microphone extruding from beneath my ear, and descend a narrow staircase in full corporate garb. Hyped up on snippets of Tom Cruise, L. Ron Hubbard, and Steve Jobs, I take my stance in front of the modest but attentive crowd. "Hello and welcome to NEO- CRAFT," I say. "If this is your first time here, let me say how happy we are that you decided to join us."*

The spectator/performer relationship is not specific to 'performance art', but belongs to a wider investigation into the ways in which physical movements, articulation, tone, rhythm and pacing anticipate the audience's positioning in both

physical and personal terms; i.e. time/proximity/place and the unknowability of the spectator's inner thoughts. These patterns are designed to hold attention, encourage reflection, or move an audience to action, producing a sensation of 'togetherness' that extends beyond the duration of the event. When implemented in direct pursuit of a defined agenda, however, functions of performance can also coalesce into dominating machinery used to shift the balance of power away from the viewer, transforming the role of boundaries and consent. Such valuation of spectatorship encourages the performer to play to people's fantasies, elevate showmanship over content, and approach the performer/spectator relationship as a strategic ground for winning the viewer's enthusiasm or trust. In response, spectators may fall back and become silent, their thoughts lying dormant or hidden until circumstances change and become suitable for them to manifest.

*Gliding through my script, arms shoulder-width apart and hands in an open gesture, I make eye contact with each person in the room. About ten minutes into the performance, I introduce a sudden change of tone, brought on by the opening riff of "For the Love of Money". The first few notes of bass bathe the room in echoing reverb. As drums and percussion join the scene, I increase the volume and intensity of my voice. When the second drum track begins, I point and jab my fingers in all directions. As the guitar fades in, I move closer to the nearest audience member and lower my voice. When, the trumpets blare and all the instruments become one, I lunge toward the back of the room and belt the magic words from my diaphragm: "This is NEO- CRAFT my friends! A groundbreaking system, now available to you, right here in this room!" The percussion drops out, a handful of spectators wince, others smile suspiciously, and a few shift in their seats while staring at me blankly.*

To maintain a dynamic of tension and consent, the performer must learn to compromise with an unknown spectator—but how to compromise when one party remains silent? The performer must, at all times, anticipate what negotiations need

to be made to ensure power flows between themselves and the spectator, and they must learn to do so with very little feedback. This can mean downplaying the performer's delivery to achieve a level of self-reflexivity, distancing themselves from their desires, diminishing professionalism or lifting the veil to reveal the mechanisms behind the illusions of their work. Whatever the case, in this constant renegotiation of the boundaries between performer and spectator, it is up to the performer to anticipate and manage what is required to nourish the flow between them both.

*As The O'Jays fade out, I notice the gaze of a middle-aged woman in a flowing blouse. She is leaning near the left corner of a large bay window with a purse on her shoulder and a NEO- CRAFT workbook and pencil in hand. She watches attentively without a hint of skepticism. Her gaze is a kind of eye contact I don't expect from an art audience. It is void of critical amusement, annoyance, or doubt. "NEO- CRAFT won't teach you techniques," I say while slicing the air with my hand. "No! What's the bottom line? Language." I begin pacing in front of the crowd. "How many times do you need to think to yourself: 'I have the potential to do something big. I have the potential to be something great?'" I turn to the woman to deliver the punchline. "But—why have you never imagined? That you could be doing it now?" The woman's eyes penetrate mine. She owns the room as much as I do, and when the session is over, she calmly waits for me near the front door.*

The audience may at any moment speak, applaud, cough, interrupt, or exit the scene. The spectator should hold onto their power no matter what the performer does. Provided this tension, the performer is pulled closer to the audience, becoming aware of their knowledge and conscious of their ability to intervene. This proximity tempers the performer, evoking their humanness and increasing the spectator's ability to involve themselves in the flow of power. Overwhelming dominance over spectatorship however, implies a separation between the shared humanness of the performer and spectator, thus diminishing the spectator's ability

to respond or physically intervene on the scene. This shields the performer's psychology from the spectator's knowingness and tips the balance in their direction. As the performer's mechanisms remain hidden and their illusions intact, the viewer becomes in danger of subjugation. The spectator must remain conscious of the performer's humanness; at minimum, by feeling the vulnerability of the performer's body in front of them. The performer must also share in this acknowledgment of mortality, a feeling that both protects and bonds performer and spectator together in a dynamic of equilibrium.

*After the performance, I greet the crowd and thank them for attending. As I walk near the woman, she stops me. I can see that her blouse is made of fine linen, neatly pressed and greyish blue. "That was just wonderful," she says beaming. "I am going to change my travel plans for the summer," she says hugging her workbook and purse strap simultaneously. "I want to be here to attend all of the NEO- CRAFT sessions you've planned for Calgary." She pauses for my response, then continues. "I've booked flights to see my mother, I haven't seen her in a long time—she's aging you see, and I was also planning to take a short trip with my sister to Florida. But after tonight's session, I'm ready to cancel all that to be here."*

By observing the performer for intense and prolonged periods, the spectator sees what the performer cannot. Through their ignorance of the performer's intentions, they hold a singular knowledge about the reality of the performance—what the performance does. If a spectator has been coerced however, the balance of power has shifted too much—power ceases to flow. Where power becomes resistant, the performer and spectator cease to maintain the dynamic equilibrium required for each to remain self-aware. If power in performance is a projection that the self responds to, power must always flow in opposite directions with equal flux, for neither performer nor spectator can participate in this dynamic of equilibrium without a constant

movement between them both.

*I feel a lump swelling in my throat. "Thank you," I say, pushing the words out as a whisper. "Thank you for coming." I want to have a meaningful dialogue with the woman about what happened, but I find it difficult to form sentences. "What you saw tonight is art," I say, lowering my voice and my gaze. "I'm hoping to shed light on some pretty common strategies for audience manipulation that remain hidden or normalized in everyday life. I do that by offering them up for contemplation in the space of art." I feel sick to my stomach, like my intentions are misplaced and I let her down. "So, if you clear your schedule," I continue, "it would be for art." I raise my eyes. The woman's face is transformed.*

The machinery of performance politics is goal-oriented, specialized and subservient to its defining agenda. It does not compromise with the audience nor converse with the viewer. It is heavy, authoritarian, and facilitates a moment of 'buying in' or 'letting go' where both the entrance and exit are uncertain. In art however, this cannot be. Art is an action by which meaning manifests through the unfolding of itself in real time. It has the capacity to move the performer and spectator in incalculable ways. This movement is not directed toward any specific agenda, but brings the spectator into the manifestations of the performer's work, and materializes the unknowability of both their futures at the same moment. The meaningful outcome is not found in how well the artist performs or how active the spectator becomes, but in how they are transformed.